



Preserving the Best of Texas

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

The first settlers in Texas typically found a way to buy small pieces of a large land grant and turn them into family farms or ranches. To Easterners, a portrait of early Texas would include a bustling agricultural community nestled amid a scenic rural vista.

Texas was built on expertise in raising cattle, planting cotton and raising a wide variety of crops. Most of the production came from family homesteads, farms and ranches.

There have been consolidations, but even today, 200,000 or more farms and ranches are working in Texas. Privately owned rural lands in Texas take up nearly 85 percent of our state. Even as public attention goes elsewhere, one-quarter of our state's booming economy still depends on agriculture.

But "fragmentation"—the need to sell parcels of farm or ranch land to keep the rest of the acreage afloat—has become a fact of life in rural areas, particularly scenic areas coveted for recreation or retirement uses. Between 1982 and 1997, more than 2.2 million rural Texas acres were converted to development; Texas lost more rural farming and ranching land than any other state.

Texas is growing rapidly. We enjoy a hospitable business climate, and many people want to live here. As urban populations boom, and more housing is built, attractive rural land is sold to accommodate the demand. The rising prices can bring wealth to some landowners.

But there's also a downside for those who wish to keep their family properties. The higher valuations bring increased property taxes. That, combined with confiscatory death taxes, can make continued family land ownership simply unaffordable. That's the darker side of land division and population growth.

Fragmentation is not simply a threat to our rural heritage of family farms. It can also endanger wildlife habitats and threaten water and soil quality. Excessive fragmentation can erode or even erase the qualities that make life in Texas and these rural communities so attractive.

How can a state retain the core of its beautiful rural character without threatening vital private property rights? One organization based in Austin, the Hill Country Conservancy, has an answer. The Conservancy brings together developers and environmentalists to preserve lands in one of our state's most beautiful wildlife and aquatic areas, the Barton Springs Edwards Aquifer region in Central Texas.

A key tool is a federal government law, the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program. The

Hill Country Conservancy pays land owners for preservation agreements that transfer future land development rights to a non-profit trust, such as the Hill Country Conservancy, or a governmental entity. The original landowner can keep the property, with the rights-holder managing the agreement to ensure the land is not sold to developers. The entire arrangement is aided by matching funds from the federal government.

Through this and other devices, the Conservancy is attempting to preserve 50,000 acres of precious Hill Country land. In the past two years, approximately \$2.4 million in federal funds has helped conserve 800 prized acres in two parcels atop the Barton Springs Edwards Aquifer region. Both parcels are on family-owned farms and were facing fragmentation.

The Hill Country Conservancy and other groups are demonstrating that traditional environmentalists and real estate developers can jointly pursue a shared goal of conserving the natural wonders of Texas. It's being done while respecting private property rights, with a helping hand from government.

Our population in Central Texas is expected to increase by more than 15 percent between 2000 and 2015, a rate twice the overall state's growth. Developers in Central Texas are working overtime to meet the region's growing residential and commercial real estate needs.

One of the main draws for businesses and individuals choosing Texas, and especially Central Texas, is the striking and scenic nature of our state. Anyone who has driven down the Capital of Texas Highway, walked or hiked in the incomparable Texas Hill Country, or taken a swim in the cool waters of the Guadalupe River can see the benefits that accrue when man watches over and protects our natural resources.

It's good for everyone that Texas stays naturally beautiful.

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.

For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: www.cornyn.senate.gov/column